

Date: Mon, 23 Oct 2000 11:56:31 -0700  
To: ira.mellman@yale.edu  
From: "Patrick O. Brown" <pbrown@cmgm.stanford.edu>  
Subject: Re: PMC/Highwire  
Cc: varmus@mskcc.org

Dear Ira,

Thank you very much for this very thoughtful and provocative message. I think I may have contributed to a misunderstanding about what is being asked in the open letter, and the nature of the online public library that it refers to. I've answered many of your specific points below:

Dear Pat,

Thanks for your useful note.

Although my support for the principles you have outlined is complete, I am afraid that there remain a number of problems with the system you have proposed, specifically regarding the hosting of JCB content -- or that of most other journals -- on PMC.

The 6 month release is one I am ideologically in favor of, and we at the journal will work with Rockefeller Press to get this done as soon as we can. Bear in mind that none of us at the JCB are "professionals" nor is our publisher "for profit"; we all have day jobs and are every bit as committed as you to promulgating the free and unfettered exchange of information. That is precisely why so many of us work so hard to maintain and improve the journal despite the fact that it is not exactly a money-making proposition.

Concerning where the content should be housed, in a precisely reciprocal fashion to your views, although I can see the superficial appeal of having everything on a single site, there are numerous serious limitations to this construct. As I presume you must know, many of these problems and limitations have been aired over the past year or so at meetings at the NLM. So much so, my understanding is that even David Lipman -- director of the NLM -- has backed off of the original idea of housing all journals on a single PMC site. As a result, I am not convinced that this is the best way to go, and for reasons that have nothing to do with proprietary control over journal content.

I don't want to speak for David Lipman on this point, but it's my understanding that (after less than a year in existence) PMC is now up to the task of serving as ONE OF the distribution sites for this public library. At any rate, I certainly didn't intend to suggest that PMC should be the SOLE central site for distribution of the archival material. I don't think this is a good idea either. What is important is that the publishers agree to allow the material to be distributed freely (via Highwire, PMC, and many other sites), so that many independent sites could provide the same content. The specific reference to PMC was intended to give some specificity as to the kinds of public distribution mechanisms that would satisfy the policy we are advocating, NOT to imply an intention that PMC be either the exclusive or even a preferred mechanism for distribution of the archival literature.

First, subsequent to last round of meeting at the NLM and NIH, I have seen no evidence that PMC is up to the task. For the JCB to transmit our content to them, we would have to completely reformat the PDF files that are currently taken in easily by Highwire.

The onus will be on PMC, and other intitutions that might want to play a similar role, to take care of this problem. I don't think it is reasonable to ask, and the letter doesn't ask, for publishers to take on the burden of reformatting their material for PMC. All that is asked is that they agree to grant distribution rights to the public domain, allowing PMC and other public distributors (implicitly including Highwire) to take on the task of doing this well.

Have you spoken with John Sack at Highwire regarding such issues? Have you contacted Heather Joseph, formerly at Molecular Biology of the Cell, regarding her journal's chronic problems interfacing with PMC? Are you aware that both PubMed (via "PubRef") and Highwire are already hard at work on full text searching? I am also told that Highwire is even heavily in to establishing a permanent archive

| function.

I have heard more than I want to about the interface problems between Highwire and PMC, and it's clear that the problems did not all arise at PMC. As far as I know, in less than a year from a standing start, these problems have been resolved to the satisfaction of MBC and PNAS, the two pilot journals.

I don't know about Highwire's investment in a permanent archive function, but I commend them for this. So much the better, for reasons you cite, that more than a single institution would take on this responsibility. I think, however, that NLM has established its reputation as an archive of biomedical literature, so despite the growing pains of PMC, there is good reason to be confident that it would take this responsibility seriously and handle it well. And I would expect other public agencies in other countries to take a similarly serious approach to managing such a public resource.

| Second, housing all content on a single site would force all journals to conform to a lowest common denominator scenario, removing incentive for innovation and enhancements, instead concentrating all power in the hands of a single US agency.

I think this reflects a misunderstanding of what the letter proposes. In no way does it propose any exclusive control by a single US agency. If the distribution rights are in the public domain, then any public (or private) group, in the US or elsewhere can innovate to enhance the utility and performance of the online public library. And if a private group like Highwire can find a way to add value (eg., by providing links to current material not yet released to the public domain), they can profit from it.

| I know that many colleagues in other countries are intrinsically suspicious of this arrangement. Your contention that the public library concept has a moral imperative derived from the fact that public money has paid for it seems rather US-centric in its underlying assumption.

I don't understand this argument at all. What do those colleagues fear? If anything, they have more to gain than we do, since US scientists generally have better access to online publications than those in other countries, particularly poorer ones. This proposal would make the material available for distribution not just via NLM, but, for example, by EMBO or CNRS or MRC, or public agencies in any other country. Again, we are talking about NON-exclusive distribution rights, not any form of exclusive control by any US entity.

| Finally, if the goal is to make the maximum amount of information freely available as soon as possible, I am not certain why it necessarily follows that this must imply that all the information is housed at a PMC site. The reasons you gave -- full text searching. I do not see why scientist-run, non-profit journals such as the JCB should be coerced by the threat of a boycott into conforming to this scenario when we are in full agreement with this goal as a matter of deeply held principle.

I don't think it is fair to refer to the letter as coercive. It is a polite request with a meaningful commitment by its signers to stand behind it. It's an attempt to achieve some parity and reciprocity in the interactions between publishers and the scientific community. The journals are free to do whatever they wish, and their authors, reviewers, editors, and subscribers are free to decide where they want to spend their efforts and money, and to make this policy issue an important component of that choice. No one who signed it, certainly including me, wants to undermine the scientific societies and non-profit publishers. I have confidence that the societies and their members will thrive under the conditions proposed in the letter.

| We disagree only in the details of how to carry it out  
|. The real problem emanates not from us but from the commercial presses, beginning with Cell and Nature which do not even permit any sort of link from PubMed. Why not target the effort in a stepwise fashion to get these organizations to at least open their doors to free links after ANY

| period of delay? I think you are asking too much of too many too soon to be effective.

This would just turn a positive and constructive statement by the scientific community into a battle with specific publishers. A stick with no carrot. Instead we wanted to emphasize that we would exclusively SUPPORT the journals that adopt what we feel is a fair policy that preserves the publishers right to make money for their role in the publication process, while still ensuring that eventually the published material is given to the public domain. It will implicitly be seen as more of a threat by those publishers whose policies are least consistent with this proposal - the Elseviers, etc., than by publishers like Rockefeller Press.

| Having said all that, were it possible to simply submit to PMC the very same PDF files we send to Highwire, I believe we might have no difficulty in participating in a public library concept so long as it did not prevent us from also maintaining our own site via Highwire. And so long as PMC could maintain quality, host updates for post-publication corrections, links to supplemental material, links to video images, etc. that have become part of the publications process.

This sounds great! It is certainly consonant with what the letter asks, and I'm sure that PMC could handle its end of the arrangement satisfactorily.

| I think that before I can proceed in supporting an inexorable march to a unified public library, I am going to have to see some hard evidence that the library will be able to do what is required and do so without stifling creativity and innovation that is the very stuff of decentralization.

What kind of evidence will you require, and how do we get around this Catch-22? How does such a library show what it can do, if the prerequisite - the published material that it is to distribute - is withheld?

Again - this is all about decentralization. I feel the same way that you do about the stifling effects of centralized control of the scientific record and scientific discourse. The system we are advocating will be much LESS centralized, with much more room for innovation than the current system.

Thanks again for your very thoughtful message.

Best regards,

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